

Manial Palace on Roda Island in central Cairo is not the first palace in Egypt to have seen better days. Nor is it the first to have been converted into a hotel for lack of a budget to keep it falling into disrepair. But it is the first time that a prince comes from the past, like in a fairy tale, to help it shine again after years of slumber; something like a 21st century sleeping palace awakened by a charming prince.



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What is new is to hear that a grandnephew of the very prince that had the palace built, in around 1903, has come to remind us that turning the palace into a museum was the very wish of his great uncle, as per his written will, and that he will be there for the government and whoever else among art lovers and friends to help fulfil this wish.

It was Prince Mohamed Ali Tawfiq (1875-1954) who had built this palace amidst enchanting gardens where Banyan trees rival with Cedar trees, Royal Palms, Indian Rubber trees and other wonderful species. These trees were part of the Bostan Al-Kebir (the large gardens) started in 1829 by the prince's great-grandfather, Viceroy Ibrahim Pasha. The trees remain the lasting wonder of Roda Island, which, lying in the Nile River bed opposite Old Cairo, were preserved from plunder and the sacrilege that contributed to erasing from Cairo most of its beauty by surrounding them with high walls of medieval appearance and awe. This enclave became later what we would know as Manial Palace, now the Manial Palace Museum, soon to be opened to the public with its glorious halls, its rare carpets, calligraphy and many other wonders.

I came to know about this story from Prince Abbas Hilmi, grandson of Khedive Abbas Hilmi II, who founded the "Friends of Manial Palace Museum Association" one year ago. As per its mission statement, the association exists to facilitate all those who love the palace to cooperate in its renovation and in identifying the museum's needs. The association also aims to raise funds and find technical advice and assistance in order to meet specific targets; to help organise meetings and cultural events, including exhibitions, lectures, visits, tours, and presentations; to cooperate with the museum's management to seek expert advice and assistance in several domains; to propagate information about the museum to schools, universities, and travel agencies; in sum, to make the museum a success.

For me this was a lesson in how joining hands can do wonders. Civil society should stop looking at the government as an adversary, and lend its hand so that together all things can work well for the people. For me, this was a model of loyalty to a great man's will, a lesson on how ownership in the narrow sense is ephemeral, and that a great man at the dawn of the past century already knew about heritage and accepted with princely grace that the wonders that he built were the true property of the nation. Finally, this was a model of love for Cairo, whose splendours still exist